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AUTHOR Mesinger, John F.
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ABSTRACT

Trends in delinquency are summarized and principles for treating violent adolescents are considered. Four major trends are identified: (1) an increase in violent crimes committed by juveniles, (2) a decrease in intact nuclear families of delinquents, (3) an increase in voluntary separation (divorce or abandonment rather than death) of parents, and (4) "discovery" of high incidence of abused handicapped youth in corrections programs. The paper cites the impact of increasing numbers of extremely violent adolescents who show no sense of guilt and no tolerance for interference. Typical characteristics of the population of violent youth who have experienced abuse and bad models at home are noted, including substance abuse, external locus of control, paranoia, and long-term deficits in hearing and attending. Guidelines are offered for understanding and dealing with the difficult behavior of troubled youths. Professionals are urged to be prepared and to understand the implications of research on a variety of topics, including the reinforcing effects of peer groups, impact of positive role models, rule making, and attention to social skills. (CL)

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Megatrends Relating to Adolescent Violence and Correctional Education

John F. Mesinger, Ph.D.
Professor, Special Education
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

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on Behavior Disorders

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Among the cardinal principles served by the scientific method is prediction and control of phenomena. For nearly a decade the popular press has conveyed an impression of continued increase in violence committed by youth. Some authorities appear to dispute each published opinion and research on this topic. However, my conversations with correctional and alternative school educators has indicated to me that there is truth to this violence theme and it stimulated my concern to determine for myself the degree of accuracy of such beliefs. This study and the more recent publication of the book Megatrends sent me searching for parallel developments which may be related in a causal fashion. My studies have also led me to search for potentially successful treatment methods. [I was not persuaded by the Martinson, Lipton and Wilks' conclusion that Nothing Works.] I intend to share with you some of the results of my study to date.

Trend No. 1

An Increase in Violent Crimes Committed by Juveniles

There has apparently been a reduction in overall crime committed by juveniles in the past few years; thereby reversing a trend of increases throughout the 1970s. [One should say "apparently" given the many limitations of the uniform crime reports and the evidence of many studies that the majority of delinquents are not noticed; hence, not recorded]. However, there appears to be another trend of far greater concern to correctional educators, if not to all of society. That is an increase in crimes of violence committed by juveniles. In a study comparing delinquents incarcerated in two widely different

decades in Oregon, the portion of violent offenses rose from 4% of the total during the period 1890-1900, to 23% during the period 1970-1980 (Young, Nielsen & Nielsen, 1983). This is reflective of a probable rate per 100,000 population increasing from 4.58 to 33.54 in a 90 year span. These figures and a breakdown of categories of offenses are shown in Table 1.

Display Table 1 About Here

Experience in Virginia over the past three years for which correctional summaries have been published would seem to indicate a small increase in proportion of violent crimes has occurred, which is not solely due to a decline in the rates of incarceration of juveniles (Children Committed, 1981, 1982, 1983). For example, in Virginia in 1983, 1,186 juveniles were received by the Department of Corrections, of which 18.6% [221 youths] committed crimes against persons. In 1982, 16.5% [207 youths] of 1,252 youths had committed crimes against persons. The report for 1981 indicated that 14.2% [180 youths] of 1,272 youths had committed crimes against persons.

Further study of this phenomenon in other states should be reported before we can be sure that there is a true pervasive growth of violent behaviors rather than a temporary reflection of the declining incidence of incarceration with a possibly more or less steady number of violent juveniles.

Among the 50 states, there is considerable variation in the rates of incarceration of juveniles. Since the mid-1970s, as the states fell into line to obtain federal funds by excluding status

offenses from those that could lead to incarceration, there have been declines in the incarceration rate for each state greater than might be attributable to a previous decline in birth rate. This has proved to be a mixed blessing to correctional teachers. Although there have been claims and some evidence that the status group contained more troubled youth than those adjudicated delinquent, these status youth generally provided the less disruptive youth to teach. Excluding them may have reduced the proportion of prosocial models that make teaching a bit easier. It does seem that the elimination of the status offender group has resulted in correctional educators receiving a more concentrated population of youth difficult to manage and teach.

Trend No. 2

A Decrease in Intact Nuclear Families of Delinquents

In the time span covered by reports of our first trend, a second possible trend of more pervasive impact on society has been documented. Of the delinquents in Virginia committed to the corrections department, 17.7% [144 youths] lived with both natural parents at the time of commitment in 1983 (Children Committed). Comparable figures for 1982 were 24.0% [243 youths] and for 1981 26.0% [303 youths]. Over the past three years at least, the portion of committed delinquents who lived with both natural parents has declined to a figure which should cause us serious concern. If this turns out to be a trend identifiable in other states, we should be initiating studies of the dimensions of the phenomenon, trend analysis, and means of assuaging the problems implied by the trend.

Trend No. 3

An Increase in Voluntary Separation of Parents

Certain key developmental events certain to drastically impact youths have changed over the last ninety years as shown in the Oregon study (Young, Nielsen & Nielsen, 1983).

Display Table 2 About Here

Although the same percentage of youth came from broken homes in both eras, [69% in 1890s and 69.5% in 1970s] the preponderant cause was death of a parent in the 1890s, whereas divorce and abandonment are the major modern causes. Loss by death dropped from 68.5% to 16.5% while loss by divorce or abandonment increased from 31.5% to 83.5%. Although the incidence of loss of both parents remained a constant 22%, loss of the father increased from 68% to 88% while loss of the mother decreased from 32% to 12%. Here, too, is confirmation of a relationship of adjudicated delinquents [mostly males] and single female parent homelife.

Research with girls has indicated that daughters are likely to behave differently when they lose fathers by death and by divorce or abandonment (Hetherington, 1972). Other longitudinal research has indicated that boys' personalities were more adversely affected by "object loss" such as death of a loved one than were girls' personalities (Cordes, 1984). Loss of the mother may result in depression and symbiotic longing. Loss of a father may lead to underdeveloped ego and superego controls over behavior. For many of these youth there are psychic wounds that need treatment. Education alone without therapeutic efforts is

not likely to be readily accomplished, nor effective. Rehabilitation will require a closely integrated effort of educators and counselor or teacher counselors using the psycho-educateur model (Nichols, 1984).

Trend No. 4

"Discovery" of High Incidence of Abused Handicapped Youth in Corrections

In the last decade this country has been discovering child abuse. The more we search the more we find. We now see evidence that abuse and separation problems impact more exceptional youth than normal delinquents. We find that the incidence of incarcerated exceptional youth in Virginia (Children Committed, 1983) [38.3%] and the nation (NASDSE, 1984) [41.4%] is much higher than was previously thought by criminologists to be the case. It may be true that there always was more abuse of children than we thought and more handicapped delinquents. I am sure the incidence rates of handicapped are not as high nationally as were reported in the early 1970s for learning disabled youth, but we can document higher incidence rates in corrections than public schools report in Virginia (Children Committed, 1983).

Display Table 3 About Here

Consider the area of learning disabilities for example. The National Center for State Courts study reported the strong relationship of learning disability and adjudicated delinquency

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(Dunivant, 1981). In a recent dissertation at the University of Virginia the candidate reported (Curtis, 1984):

1. LD delinquents were significantly higher on the external locus of control dimension than their non-LD counterparts.
2. LD delinquents were over-represented in single parent families while non-LD delinquents were over-represented in two parent family categories.
3. LD delinquents had a higher incidence of reported parental abuse than non-LD adolescents.

Her study supports the susceptibility and school failure models of LD/JD relationship but not the differential treatment model. Appropriate extensions of her research would include recidivism rates and family background variables such as divorce/separation.

In my professional work with delinquent youth needing special education, I have been impressed with the large incidence of abuse in the records of these youth. Untreated child abuse leaves psychic wounds that make educational efforts far more difficult to achieve and largely irrelevant after the commitment is finished. Thus, it is important that these problems, which will interfere with education if they are not treated, should be identified. We can expect to find certain behavioral indicators of a need for treatment when there has been chronic abuse of adolescents.

The following six are frequently evident:

1. Chronicity of abusive and/or neglectful experiences is visible in the adolescents' background;

2. Chronic delinquent behaviors involve acts that started before adolescence and have continued since;
3. Delinquent acts that at an earlier age were status offenses become, in adolescence, nonstatus in nature and involve serious crimes;
4. Chronic depressive conditions are characterized by extreme aggressiveness or extreme withdrawal;
5. Psychopathology is manifested in such behaviors as inability to relate to peers and adults and/or inability to control aggression;
6. The home situation is characterized by chronicity of the parents' problems.

Long term abuse appears to result in more violent and intractible delinquent behaviors than abuse which begins at puberty when parents lose the ability to control their children by conventional (to them) measures[1].

We can expect to see the following results of long term abuse:

Chronically abused adolescents:

1. may bear their victimization silently
2. may fight back violently
3. may run away

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[1] I am indebted to Dr. Hugh Leichtman, Director of Wediko Childrens Services in Boston for describing the differential impact resulting from when abuse starts.

Effects of chronic abuse on children are usually manifested by antisocial behaviors:

1. armed robbery
2. breaking and entering
3. forgery
4. use of drugs

Interpersonal relationships are characterized by:

1. aggression
2. hostility
3. mistrust

Long term abuse interferes with adolescents dealing with developmental issues which leads to chronic depression, shown by:

1. sexual promiscuity
2. unreliable at assigned tasks
3. drug abuse
4. poor ties with peer group

Force and violence are parents' ways of communicating between themselves and with their children. The child's needs for love, affection, and security are never met.

For a larger portion of adolescents what amounts to abuse begins only when parents are faced with the pubescents' rebelliousness or craziness and the old child control methods no longer seem to work.

We still observe a lot of problematic behaviors but the depth and severity of disturbance do not seem to be present as it is with chronically abused youth.

Abuse usually begins at onset of adolescence as parents seek to control children's rebelliousness. Abuse is a symptom of parent's inability to communicate with their children.

Adolescents typically act out, commit delinquent acts, behavior incorrigibly, truant, run away, and commit minor antisocial acts.

Most behaviors seem to be reactions to depression caused by environmental stress.

Results observable are poor school attendance and achievement, fatigue, restlessness, and a continued search for new and "more interesting" friends.

In my remarks on the fourth trend I alluded to a far higher than average representation of learning disabled, emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded youth among incarcerated youth. These youth have been educational failures until the time you receive them and most are, to say the least, damn angry about it. These present instructional problems of considerable degree but must be the topic for another day.

The group that should concern us most today is composed of the extremely violent adolescents, apparently free from conscience, whose numbers are increasing in all types of child care programs, prisons, and alternatives[2].

Parents typically report a climate of terror in the home from these youth and some petition the courts to protect

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[2] Dr. Pierre Gauthier, Director of the Psycho-Educateur Program at the University of Montreal described for me how resistant these youth are to many forms of group treatment.

themselves and siblings. These youth show no sense of guilt; all are extropunitive. They show no tolerance for interference--this gives them the right in their eyes to be hostile and in an almost constant rage. Most exhibit much denial of inner feelings of rage. It is as if they must ignore insight in order to remain in control of the power of hostility. They seem to need to affirm their all powerfulness all of the time. This tends to provoke more force from society and the police. Large increases are found in self-destructive, cheap, homosexual, prostitution, mixed, poor quality, drug use and very destructive breaking and entering. To survive in the streets both sexes sell themselves to prostitution and to obtain expensive drugs. In any program such youth are able to lock the staff into control issues to the detriment of all. It seems difficult to design a program to meet all of the challenges they present. In most agencies serving adolescents, staffs seem to fear and reject violent offenders. It would require an extremely well prepared, supported and paid staff and likely take 4 to 5 years of treatment for success with such youth.

Within the population of violent youth who have experienced abuse and bad models at home are many, if not most, who exhibit long term deficits in hearing and attending. They experience an external locus of control and feelings of paranoia. Their deficits lead to conflicts; which in turn lead to accumulation of deficits, warping of experience, resistence to change, errors in social thinking, errors in causal thinking and a desire to escape from responsibilities. Most show either extreme withdrawal or

impulsive reaction formation. Many will have been in treatment before you receive them; usually with trainee level people (because they are not affluent and cannot afford high fees for services).

In their social histories, present or past substance abuse by family members is frequent. Separation from families is intermittant. Periodic violence initiated by one of the parents is reported. If a family is not safe, a child cannot trust; cannot predict conflict, so this makes for tension in the family.

Techniques and Skills

"... so much of behavior--child behavior, adolescent behavior deals with kids that are trying to get the adults' attention in an inappropriate way ... If you attend to that behavior, that inappropriate behavior, you end up reinforcing it." Nicholas J. Long, Ph.D.

1. Much of the behavior of the troubled adolescent is related to his effort to get the adults' attention in an inappropriate way. It is critical for the adult to react to this behavior in a way that does not reinforce its negative "attention-getting" behavior.
2. The difficult behavior of troubled youths <u>can</u> be constructively managed. Essential factors (aspects) of this management include:
   a. The adult's sensitivity to the youth's needs;
   b. The adult's ability to focus on the youth's behavior in a specific situation and avoid getting involved in a power struggle with the youth;

c. The adult's ability to set limits which protect the youth from harming himself or others and which at the same time are supportive to the youth;

d. The adult's ability to intervene appropriately and provide the controls which enable the youth to better deal with reality and to regain self-control.

3. Specific techniques for managing difficult behavior of troubled youth include:

a. Ignoring the troubled youth's negative behavior while verbalizing the positive behavior desired (planned ignoring); while a good first step, this is often ineffective with angry adolescents;

b. Anticipating the provocative behavior of a youth in a group and moving near that youth (proximity control); this is usually a good move, but must be done with confidence and skill to handle consequences;

c. Deciding the amount of physical closeness that the youth can tolerate and place a hand on his shoulder, or refrain from touching the youth (touch control), for angry adolescents this method should be used sparingly;

d. Holding the youth therapeutically to protect him from hurting himself, someone else or destroying property (physical restraint). There are times to do this but it takes timing and skill. There are risks which must be acknowledged.

4. Adults must have the ability to exercise reasonable limit setting in spite of the irrationality of the youth's mood and actions.
5. In dealing with the difficult behavior of the troubled youth, the adult has the responsibility to find the appropriate intervention which clearly communicates the desired behaior to the youth.
6. Techniques for managing the behavior of troubled youths are most successful when used within the context of an existing, meaningful, relationship between the adult and the youth.

What to do About This?

1. Don't expect to effect a cure in 6 months. By the same token don't sell them short as uneducable.
2. Prepare yourself. Gain:
   a. knowledge of special education teaching methods;
   b. knowledge of media to motivate and involve youth in the learning process;
   c. knowledge of adolescent development;
   d. knowledge of slanguage--ribbin', jivin', playing the dozens;
   e. knowledge of self-defense skills so that you are not easily frightened.
3. Understand what research has to tell you:
   a. The peer group is most influential and the delinquent peers tend to reinforce much more negative behavior than positive behavior.

b. Delinquent leaders take positive steps to try to keep their peers from using you as a model.

c. Try to use positive role models in your groups but with care so that you don't force them into rejection of you to avoid problems within their cottage groups.

d. Show respect for their humanity by your dress, speech, and demeanor. Purge youself of prejudicial speech and attitudes. Since you may not be aware of these, you must have knowledgeable co-workers and make time for growth as a team of teachers.

e. The best role models among their peers are not available to you and would reject your pupils if they were present. They will do so on the outside. Thus, there is a great need for a social skills curriculum to teach delinquents more acceptable behaviors.

f. You cannot undo over a decade of distorted thinking in 6 months, but you can begin to teach a better method of thinking.

g. You want to teach them to accept personal responsibility--develop an internal locus of control.

h. You want to teach them how to make rules, make decisions, and negotiate conflicts.

i. You want to know exactly what they understand of what you say and do, so you develop a "Tell me

what I just said" approach. I promise you will be shocked to hear how little or how distorted it comes back to you. Carefully repeat it and request a response again.

j. This means that when you give out work for a group to do, your role should change to that of coach. Travel about the class to be sure each youth is on task and not rehearsing errors.

k. Lead them to organize their learning activities and develop their rules and consequences and work on conflict resolution group activites where ever necessary. Remember, many more youths lose jobs because of deficits in social skills than inability to do the work.

l. Get the positive reinforcers and praise comments going--quiet and personal at first until you know the group can handle some members being singled out for praise.

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